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**COMMITTEE ON THE BUDGET**  
**MAJORITY CAUCUS**  
**U.S. House of Representatives**  
**106th Congress — Washington, DC**

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**TASK FORCE ON NATURAL RESOURCES AND THE ENVIRONMENT**

**CONTINUED PROBLEMS  
IN FOREST SERVICE TRAINING**  
**A WHITE PAPER**

June 2000

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**U.S. House of Representatives**  
COMMITTEE ON THE BUDGET  
Washington, DC 20515

30 June 2000

Dear Chairman Kasich:

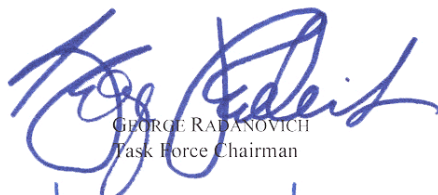
This white paper, by the Majority Members of the Budget Committee's Task Force on Natural Resources and the Environment, presents our findings on the status of the Forest Service's efforts to professionalize its employee training system – commonly referred to as its corporate training program.

As long ago as 1996, Forest Service officials themselves ridiculed their training system for its redundancies and inconsistencies, and recommended a number of improvements. These recommendations became the foundation of the new training plan. But the complete plan was not approved until this past December, and will not be fully implemented until fiscal year 2003 – 7 years after training was identified as a serious problem in the agency.

Given the agency's history of poor management and lack of commitment to accountability – matters also examined in this paper – we remain skeptical that the plan will be put in place as promised. The Forest Service's organization reflects what the General Accounting Office has termed an "indifference toward accountability." This problem is significant because the successful implementation of any training program is a function of an organization's environment and culture.

Therefore, as a result of these findings, we recommend that Congress maintain its oversight, and carefully monitor implementation of the corporate training program.

Sincerely,



GEORGE RADANOVICH  
Task Force Chairman



PAT TOOMEY  
Vice Chairman



WALLY HERGER



GIL GUTKNECHT

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In 1996, officials at the Forest Service developed a draft proposal for correcting longstanding weaknesses in the agency's training programs. The report acknowledged that personnel training suffered from "redundancies, inconsistencies, lack of integration, and other characteristics of a fragmented unit-by-unit approach."

Yet a new plan for Forest Service training did not receive approval until December 1999, and now is not expected to be fully implemented until fiscal year 2003. Meanwhile, instances of questionable training initiatives have continued to occur – including the recent diversion of \$500,000 from firefighting to "workforce diversity projects" that included development and training.

This paper, prepared for the House Budget Committee's Task Force on Natural Resources and the Environment, provides an update on implementation of the Forest Service's new training strategy. The paper also addresses the broader issue of chronic management problems and lack of accountability at the Forest Service – the organizational culture in which training decisions are made and implemented. Finally, the paper contains appendices concerning Forest Service personnel policies, and recent concerns about the agency's firefighting capabilities, which may be affected by both training practices and overall management.

The discussion will show that continued scrutiny and oversight by the Congress are appropriate to assure that the training reforms take place as intended.

## **BACKGROUND**

The Forest Service, part of the U. S. Department of Agriculture, manages a range of activities in the Nation's 155 national forests, covering 730 million acres (33 percent of the total land area of the United States). These activities include timber cutting, resource protection (such as firefighting), and recreation activities. The Service has nine regional offices, each headed by a senior official; a forest supervisor at each forest; and rangers in several ranger districts within each forest. The regional offices also have varying numbers of scientists, recreation officials, and support personnel. Including Washington offices, the Service has a total of approximately 30,000 employees.

Training offered by the Forest Service includes basic training courses needed by all employees, technical courses that concentrate on employees' particular specialized areas,

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and management and leadership training courses. For several years, the courses have been taught on an apparently *ad hoc* basis that is inconsistent, wasteful, and lacking in accountability. In June 1996, an internal report to the head of the Forest Service said in part: “[T]he current Forest Service training process has redundancies, inconsistencies, lack of integration, and other characteristics of a fragmented unit-by-unit approach that are very costly to the agency. . . . The Forest Service’s expense in the training program . . . exceeds that of private high-technology industry.”<sup>1</sup>

Other excerpts from the report included the following criticisms:

- < “There is no coordinated method for proposing, designing, selecting participants, and conducting training. This results in an ‘anything goes’ approach.”
- < “Under the current system, an employee may request training based on what is available rather than what is essential. At times, training is offered or taken as a reward.”
- < “There is often little counseling or direction in training needed in foundation, technical, leadership, or personal development.”
- < “Training programs are frequently selected from vendors without regard to whether they truly meet the expectations for developing or strengthening managerial competencies. This can result in wasteful, unnecessary training, which translates to wasted funds.”

According to Forest Service officials, the total cost of training is approximately \$116 million – of which \$12 million to \$15 million is tuition, the one element of training most easily identified in the budgets of offices providing training. The report indicated that the \$116 million includes travel costs, meals, and time lost from work.

The report included the following recommendations, which formed the basis of the agency’s new corporate training program:

- < Design centers, where standardized courses would be developed in the areas of foundation development, technical improvement, and leadership.
- < A computer-based information system, which was to use direct electronic submissions of needs from employees, provide an electronic listing of courses offered, and compile evaluation data of courses, schedules, and instructors.

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<sup>1</sup> *National Re-engineering of the Forest Service Training Process, Design Team Draft Report*, 21 June 1996.

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- < Delivery of training as close to trainees as possible, to save time and travel costs. High-technology training capabilities would be used where appropriate, whether through classroom instruction, CD-ROM, or the Internet.

Two years after these recommendations were made, the Forest Service's new plan for personnel training still had not been approved, and on 25 June 1998 the House Resources Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health held a hearing to discuss why. The head of the Forest Service declined to testify, but Forest Service officials who did appear indicated they were working to implement the plan.

"The committee wants to see action and implementation soon," Subcommittee Chairwoman Helen Chenoweth-Hage told the officials. "The committee would like to see a final re-engineering report for training by August 3. . . . I do want to know that this is being implemented in the field."<sup>2</sup>

Although elements of the plan were being applied piecemeal, it was not until December 1999 that the complete corporate training plan – including the recommendations cited above – was approved by Forest Service management. The plan will not be fully implemented until fiscal year 2003.

### **CONTINUED TRAINING PROBLEMS**

Meanwhile, problematic training incidents have continued, such as the following:

- < In February 1996, a Forest Service Leadership Improvement Training session was held in Sacramento, CA. According to internal documents, the conference featured "drumming, singing, body movement, story telling, and a living sculpture process. . . . [The conference also featured a] dance party facilitated by a top notch DJ."

Commenting on the session, Rep. Wally Herger (R-CA) said: "If the Forest Service managers want to recreate a 1960s-style encounter session, they should do it on their own time and on their own dime. We are facing our potentially most serious fire season in recent history, we have forests choked with dead and dying trees, and the Forest Service is squandering its resources on bizarre gatherings that resemble a group therapy session more than a management training session."<sup>3</sup>

- < In November 1997, more than 700 Forest Service employees attended another conference in Sacramento. According to press reports just before the event:

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<sup>2</sup> Hearing of the House Resources Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health, 25 June 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Statement by Rep. Herger, 16 August 1996.

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“[E]mployees are preparing for a 3-day motivational seminar where ‘everyone’s truth is truth’ and discussions are made ‘as if the future were now.’”<sup>4</sup>

The internal memo discussing the meeting indicates that one key principle to be discussed was that “integrating diverse perspectives via dialogue leads to common understanding. Everyone’s truth is truth. Alternative realities are OK.”<sup>5</sup> In addition, when the Washington office of the Forest Service approved the conference, the estimated cost was \$281,000. The actual total cost was \$521,000. The additional spending was not approved by headquarters.

- < In August 1997, a 4-day conference was sponsored by the Rural Community Assistance Program to facilitate and foster sustainable rural community development. The conference was to focus on the principle of community-based, community-led approaches. Yet only 10 percent of the 522 attendees were actually from the communities that the conference was designed to assist. The group with the most representation was the Forest Service, with 161 of the attendees, about 30 percent of the entire group. The Forest Service paid approximately \$200,000 to have its employees attend the conference.
- < In February 2000, according to internal documents, the Forest Service Washington Office redirected \$500,000 from the firefighting budget to be made available for “workforce diversity projects.” A memo from the director of Fire and Aviation Management encouraged regional foresters to submit proposals that would “increase diversity and skill levels in the Fire and Aviation work force.”<sup>6</sup> A key project category under the program is training.

This diversion was recommended despite significant fires of the previous summer. Fires occurred throughout the West, but especially in California, where 500,000 acres burned, at a cost of \$200 million. “This is clearly misguided,” Rep. Herger said in a statement about the diversion of funds. “Last year’s devastating fire season should be sufficient evidence that the Forest Service needs every dime of the firefighting budget.”<sup>7</sup> Shortly thereafter, the Service faced major fire problems in New Mexico, Colorado, and Florida.

Such “diversity” training also resembles numerous examples of Forest Service personnel policies that appear to emphasize factors *other than* developing needed

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<sup>4</sup> *The Coeur d’Arlene Press*, 8 November 1997.

<sup>5</sup> Memorandum to all Region 5 employees. Subject: November Employee Event, 2 October 1997.

<sup>6</sup> Forest Service internal memorandum, *Call for Workforce Diversity Project Proposals*, 25 February 2000.

<sup>7</sup> Statement by Rep. Herger, 4 May 2000.

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competencies with the best qualified personnel. These personnel issues are further discussed in Appendix A.

## MANAGEMENT PROBLEMS

Although Forest Service officials have pledged to implement the new training plan, the agency's track record in management and accountability – the environment in which the reforms would take place – has been the subject of considerable skepticism. As recently as 29 June 2000, the General Accounting Office [GAO] said:

In April 1997, we reported that inefficiency and waste within the Forest Service resulted, in part, from the agency's culture of indifference toward accountability and its failure to hold managers accountable for their performance . . . Almost 3 years later, the Chief of the Forest Service observed that the change in culture had not occurred. In his February 16, 2000, testimony he stated that, to restore the agency's credibility with the Congress and the American people, the Forest Service must change its culture, recognizing that it cannot be an effective resource manager if it is not first accountable for taxpayer money and for its own actions on the landscape.<sup>8</sup>

These comments echo those of an August 1999 report prepared for the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior by a panel from the National Academy of Public Administration [NAPA]. Said NAPA's report: "The U.S Forest Service has lost credibility because of persistent management weaknesses, financial accounting deficiencies, problems with the relevance and veracity of its data, and the poor quality of its strategic planning."<sup>9</sup>

Other significant remarks from the report included the following:

- < "In the end, the source of the Forest Service's problems is . . .the lack of managerial accountability. . . . [B]ased on past failures of leadership to carry through fully on reforms, the panel is concerned whether the Forest Service will do what needs to be done. It is also concerned that there is inadequate recognition that the real issue is the lack of managerial accountability, and underlying that, insufficient proactive, consistent, and focused leadership."
- < "Regional foresters who are responsible for approximately 80 percent of the agency's budget and manage over 90 percent of the agency's employees, appear to have less input to the chief than do [Washington-based officials]."

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<sup>8</sup> GAO, testimony to the House Resources Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health.

<sup>9</sup> The National Academy of Public Administration, *Restoring Managerial Accountability to the United States Forest Service*, August 1999.

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- < “A common theme emerged in almost every interview the study team had with staff of the Forest Service’s Washington Office . . . that lines of authority and a clear understanding of who was responsible for what were poorly understood. While typical written policy guidance was generally in place, no one seems to follow the directions set forth in publications.”
  - < “Management groups [frequently used to make decisions in the Forest Service] . . . are often a reflection of weak, timid, or absent leadership. They can also delay decision-making, resulting in poor quality decisions.”
  - < “Time and again, the study team heard examples of meetings at all levels of the organization that failed to resolve issues principally because of the strong desire not to upset any of the participants by exercising decision-making authority.”
  - < “The Academy panel’s concern stems from the failure of leadership to focus on the primary problem besetting Forest Service operations . . . the lack of managerial accountability.”

These criticisms reflect numerous deficiencies in Forest Service management and accountability. They are significant here because the successful implementation of any training program is a function of an organization’s environment and culture. Poor management and accountability can weaken the agency’s ability to implement its corporate training program as intended. (Concerns about the effect of management problems on critical activities, such as firefighting, are addressed in Appendix B.)

## **CONCLUSION**

As noted in the introduction, Forest Service officials have been aware of problems in the agency’s training regimen for several years, and in 1996 prepared a series of recommendations for reform. But the complete reform plan was not approved until December 1999, and now will not be fully implemented until 2003. Meanwhile, cases of questionable training programs have continued to occur.

In addition, the plan’s success will depend on strong managerial direction and accountability – qualities that have been chronically lacking at the agency. Consequently, progress on the program warrants continued scrutiny and oversight by the Congress, to help assure the plan is implemented as intended.

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## Appendix A PERSONNEL POLICIES

The Forest Service's training programs reflect an emphasis that has grown in the agency's personnel policies overall – especially those relating to workforce “diversity.” The focus has allowed an impression to emerge that the agency's “diversity” concerns have come to take precedence over staff qualifications. Examples include the following:

- < In 1994 and 1995, the Forest Service advertised openings for various positions, including fishery biologist, electronics technician, landscape architect, and accounting technician. In each of the announcements, the evaluation criteria included the following statement, or a variation on it: “Demonstrated commitment to civil rights or contribution to a diverse workforce.” In a letter to the head of the Forest Service, Rep. Wally Herger (R-CA), expressed a concern that “this requirement appears to insist on a ‘commitment’ to a particular point of view as a condition of employment.”<sup>10</sup>
- < In 1995, notes from an internal Forest Service meeting of the Civil Rights Action Group [CRAG] read in part: “[O]ne barrier statement which was removed from the AEPP [Affirmative Employment Program Plan] involved the perception many employees have that job selections/promotions do not go to the most qualified person. This was determined to be ‘fact of life’ rather than a barrier. A letter will be coming out shortly to all employees explaining that there are many factors involved in the selection process, and that the objective is to select a qualified person – not necessarily the most qualified.”<sup>11</sup>
- < In 1997, the Forest Service issued a merit promotion plan, including the following quote: “Selection procedures [for promotion] will provide for management's right to select or not select from among a group of best qualified candidates.”<sup>12</sup>
- < An internal memorandum by a Forest Service assistant director for affirmative action, referenced in congressional testimony by Rep. Herger., states: “[T]he only legal requirement is to meet entry level qualification requirements. As long as that happens the procedural requirements have been met for the position in question. Greater tenure may produce candidates who are overqualified, but that is

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<sup>10</sup> Letter from Rep. Herger to Jack Ward Thomas, then-Forest Service Chief, 25 January 1995.

<sup>11</sup> Notes from Civil Rights Action Group meeting 11 January 1995.

<sup>12</sup> Memorandum to regional and station personnel officers on the subject: “Final Draft of the Forest Service Merit Promotion Plan,” 21 February 1997.

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irrelevant to the issue at hand, which is getting on with the agency affirmative action program.”<sup>13</sup>

- < The Washington office’s February 2000 decision to divert \$500,000 from firefighting directed the funds not only to diversity training programs, but also to other projects that “contribute to diversity in jobs and areas where women and/or minorities are under represented . . . [and where] the end result of the diversity funding should be to institutionalize diversity within the [Fire and Aviation Management] program.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Herger testimony to the House Committee on Government Reform and Oversight, Subcommittee on Civil Service, 27 September 1997.

<sup>14</sup> Forest Service internal memorandum, *Call for Workforce Diversity Project Proposals*, 25 February 2000.

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## **Appendix B**

### **MANAGEMENT EFFECT ON FIREFIGHTING CAPABILITIES**

One of the Forest Service's most significant activities is firefighting, and the agency's personnel, training, and management policies could play a significant role in whether it can handle these responsibilities.

According to an *NBC Nightly News* story on 15 June 2000, this year's fire season is the worst in 5 years and it is straining staffing needs. "The 2000 fire season is exposing what the Forest Service calls a critical shortage of trained firefighters," the NBC report said. "New personnel are badly needed to fight the worst fire season since 1996. Already 1.2 million acres have burned in 45,000 fires – figures not reached in a normal year until September."

Citing the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, ID, the NBC report also said that fires in the region are jumping out of control twice as often as in the past. Before 1994, the Fire Center said it lost control of 1 percent to 2 percent of all wildfires. Now that has jumped to 3 percent to 4 percent.

The concerns about the agency's ability to handle its firefighting duties were also recently expressed by the House Appropriations Committee. The committee wrote: "The Committee is also concerned that the Administration has not been able or willing to provide a strategic and tactical approach to dealing with this problem." The report also said the following:

The Committee directs the Forest Service to report to the House and Senate Committees on Appropriations by March 1, 2001, on agency efforts to manage large fire incidents and indicate clearly the status of agency action on the recent policy study on implications of large fire management . . . . The Committee is concerned about the condition of forests and hazardous fuels on National Forest System lands, especially in the more arid portions of the West.<sup>15</sup>

The committee also called for the Forest Service to report on its ability to address hazardous fuels on national forest lands:

The Committee directs the Forest Service to provide to the House and Senate Committees on Appropriations by March 1, 2001 a description of the hazardous fuels situation on NFS lands; the priorities, by national forest, for their treatment; the means for integrating this work with other forest and habitat

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<sup>15</sup> House Committee on Appropriations, report on the Department of the Interior and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill, June 2000. Although the Forest Service is part of the Department of Agriculture, its funding is provided in the Interior appropriations act.

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management goals and collaboration with the Department of the Interior; performance measures and anticipated accomplishments.<sup>16</sup>

The Appropriations Committee also expressed concern about the agency's spending priorities, as indicated in the following:

The Committee remains very concerned that too much funding is being taken “off the top” for various headquarters-driven initiatives and special projects, all to the detriment of vital on-the-ground conservation and public service activities . . . Further, the Committee is seriously concerned that the present allocation process results in remixing and reprioritizing funds before ultimately reaching the national forest level for accomplishment of work intended by the Congress.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

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